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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature about reading instruction for ethnically different students discloses a body of information largely disconnected and biased. Numerous factors are alleged to be determinants of the reading retardation of such students. Generally, these fall into two categories: racial factors in intelligence and cultural deprivation. The author concludes that minority ethnic groups, and especially blacks, have been and still are enmeshed in racial-, class-, caste-, and self-image problems. However, if members of minority ethnic groups are respected, accepted, and taught as human beings, their average performance might eventually reach the norm performance of other human beings who are so taught. (A bibliography is included.) (AL)

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REALITIES AND FALLACIES OF READING INSTRUCTION FOR ETHNICALLY DIFFERENT STUDENTS: COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE CONCERNS

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REALITIES AND FALLACIES OF READING INSTRUCTION FOR ETHNICALLY DIFFERENT STUDENTS: COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE CONCERNS

Probably there is no issue in American education which is being discussed more today than the issue of educating the ethnically different student. I think that one of the problems of educating the ethnically different student is that everyone is doing more talking than anything else.

The major emphasis in this paper is cognitive and affective concerns of the ethnically different reader. As one surveys the literature, various synonyms for the ethnically different are found: culturally disadvantaged, the disadvantaged, culturally deprived, the educationally disadvantaged, the socially rejected, the socially deprived, the culturally different, the chronically poor, the poverty stricken, educationally disoriented, under privileged, slum children, lower socio-economic group, disaffected, and lower class. Generally, most, if not all the studies containing these labels are concerned with minority group children - Blacks,

American Indians, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. Some try to find more euphemistic synonyms than others. In this presentation ethnically different and culturally disadvantaged are used synonymously.

What are the factors which are alleged to be determinants of reading retardation of ethnically different students? Among them are over-crowded housing, deteriorated housing, poor hygienic conditions in the environment, the lack of education on the part of the parents, restricted language usage in the home, parent's failure to read to children, the parents' inability to provide sufficient stimulation for the child, the absence of a father figure, the absence of books, crayons, pencils, and paper in the home, broken homes, slum conditions, a lack of success in the academic situation, and lack of the verbal and abstract behavior patterns that are required for successful work in the public schools and normal functioning in our society.

Numerous theories and explanations have been offered as to why disadvantaged children do poorly in reading. Havighurst (6, p.455) identifies deficits in certain experiences in the family. He says, disadvantaged children have not had:

1. A family environment which: sets an example of reading; provides a variety of toys and play materials with colors, sizes, and objects that challenge his ingenuity to use both his hands and his mind.

2. A family conversational experience which answers his questions and encourages him to ask questions; extends his vocabulary with new words and with adjectives and adverbs; gives him a right and a need to stand up for and to explain his point of view on the world.

Gordon (5) avers that minority ethnic groups, whether Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican American or American Indian, represent the disadvantaged who come to school with a culture which has failed to provide them with the experiences "normal" to the children the schools are accustomed to teaching.

> In addition, they and their parents are in varying degrees sufficiently alienated from the professed values and mores of the broader community to distort, if not preclude, productive involvement in school and community affair. It is not surprising then that the children of these families show high rates of social retardation and mental subnormality.
>
> Also, ... these are the people who are handicapped by depressed social and economic status and who, in too many instances, are further handicapped by ethnic and cultural caste status.

Deutsch (4) has studied chidlren who are handicapped by a lack of family conversations, playthings, and other experiences on which he says the developing mind must feed. He found them to have inferior auditory discrimination, inferior visual discrimination, inferior judgment concerning time, number and other basic concepts. He found that this inferiority is not due to physical defects of eyes and ears and brain, but is due to inferior habits of hearing and seeing and thinking. Consequently, the assumption is that the family environment of these children did not teach them to "pay attention" to what was being said around them, or to the visual scene. Then, when they came to school, their school performance suffered because they had not learned to "listen" to the teacher and other important people or to "see" the things they are shown in school.

This analysis is based on the proposition that family experience is the dominant factor in the child's cognitive development and that preschool experience in the family makes the greatest difference between a child who comes to the first grade "ready" to read and a child of equal endowment who enters the first grade quite "unready" to read.

Combining attitude and aptitude deficits into a hypothetical profile of the ethnically different or disadvantaged student one gets a picture somewhat like this:

> The disadvantaged pupil is noticeably limited in motivation to achieve; the disadvantaged pupil is unable to postpone immediate gratification for more distant goals; the disadvantaged pupil experiences difficulty in persisting toward the more distant goals; the disadvantaged pupil is glaringly weak in language development and verbalization skills; the disadvantaged

> pupil is sadly lacking in concept formation; the disadvantaged pupil's lack of aggressiveness in some instances reaches that stage of passivity which is detrimental to his school progress (2, pp.326-27).

The majority of studies concerned with characteristics and/or definitions of the disadvantaged seem to be rather subjective and vague. Specifically, such studies seem to indicate that the term "disadvantaged" refers to children who: live in a noisy, over-crowded, disorganized home environment; belong to a minority ethnic group; reside in a depressed geographic location; are victims of poverty or low socio-economic status; exhibit noticeable deficiences in language, cognition, and intelligence; manifest inadequate perceptual styles and patterns of intellectual function for academic efficiency; possess little or no motivation or aspiration for a formal education; all of the preceding; any single one of the preceding factors; or any combination of them.

In our present state of ignorance about how best to teach children who are spread over an enormously wide range of abilities and proclivities and diverse cultural backgrounds, we can hardly justify many of the findings documented in innumerable studies.

There is a variety of explanations for these persistent findings. Historically, among the earliest explanations was that the poor performance of Negro children was due to their inherent racial inferiority. At the end of the last century and the beginning of the twentieth century no one had any real question or doubt as to why Negro youngsters seemed to be performing below the level of white youngsters. It was the inherent inferiority of the groups from which they came. This interpretation seemed to be the dominant interpretation up intil about the second or third decade of the twentieth century, even among social scientists and educators (1).

More recently it has become fashionable to attempt to explain the persistent

fact of the academic retardation of Negro children in terms of general environmental disabilities. Generally, proponents of the cumulative deficit theories do not talk of racial differences; they talk primarily in terms of environmental differences. These explanations tend to emphasize such environmental conditions as the total pattern of racial discrimination and segregation which deprives the ability of these children to learn. They talk about economic and job discrimination, substandard housing, poor nutrition, parental apathy, and lack of stimulation which genrally reflect lack of educational opportunities for the parents themselves.

The most recent version of the environmental approach is cultural deprivation (1). Generally, those students using this term as well as others mentioned previously, are concerned with minority-group children, lower-status children, and lower socioeconomic-status children.

Some studies point to rather specific aspects of the environment. These usually pertain to the home, such as lack of education on the part of the parents and inability of the parents to provide sufficient stimulation for the child.

Specific conditions in the family have been offered as explanations for the inability of the child to learn to read in the primary grades, such as either inability of a parent to stimulate the verbal ability of the child by the inadequacy of the parents; or the fact that lower-class parents do not speak to their children; their children therefore are not stimulated to speak in the way in which teachers would like them to; or even that there is too much talking in the home. There is the explanation in some studies that minority-group children do not learn to read or pay attention in the classroom because there is so much noise in the culturally deprived home that children have to protect themselves by cutting off their auditory sensory functions; they automatically block out noise. This behavior starts in the home and continues in the classroom.

Some of the studies emphasize the absence of things; not just stimulation, overstimulation, or understimulation, but the absence of specific things such as pencils, books, and paper. In some instances, the term "no books in the house" is offered as an explanation for reading retardation or inability to read on the part of minority-group children.

The picture of deprivation given by these theories is one of total stark, bleak deprivation. The degree of deprivation in urban working-class Negro homes is so stark that the child has absolutely no sensory stimulation whatsoever and no opportunity to go out and mark up walls or anything of that sort. Middle-class children have the chalk, crayons, pencils and other writing materials. Therefore, four-letter words on walls and billboards must be a product of middle-class children (1).

In 1930, Otto Klineberg's research resulted in a serious re-examination and a revision of this inherent racial-inferiority explanation. Recently, Arthur Jensen (7), a noted professor of educational psychology of the University of California, revived the explanation only to maximize differences between blacks and whites and maximize the possibility that differences in cognition (I Q and scholastic achievement) are attributable to hereditary factors. The main points of Jensen's article in the Winter Issue of the Harvard Educational Review, 1969 are summarized below (9, p.48).

1. Negro scores averaging about 15 points below the white average on I Q tests must be taken seriously as evidence of genetic differences between the two races in learning patterns.

2. Research suggests that such a difference would tend to work against Negroes and against the "disavantaged" generally when it comes to "cognitive" learning - abstract reasoning - which forms the basis for intelligence measurements and for the higher mental skills.

3. Conversely, Negroes and other "disadvantaged" children tend to

do well in tasks involving rote learning - memorizing mainly through repetition and these aptitudes can be used to help raise their scholastic achievement and job potential.

4. Unfortunately, big programs of "compensatory" education, now costing taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars a year, are doomed to failure as long as they picture old approaches stressing "cognitive" learning.

In response to Jensen's article "How Much Can We Boost I Q and Scholastic Achievement?" much controversy has developed among other prominent psychologists. One significant rebuttal to "Racial Factors in Intelligence" is the statement that was prepared and signed unanimously by the Council of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, a division of the American Psychological Association (8).

As behavioral scientists, we believe that statements specifying the hereditary components of intelligence are unwarranted by the present state of scientific knowledge and we believe statements may be seriously misinterpreted, particularily in their applications to social policy.

The evidence of four decades of research on this problem can be readily summarized. There are marked differences in intelligence test scores when one compares a random sample of whites and Negroes. What is equally clear is that little definitive evidence exists that leads to the conclusion that such differences are innate. The evidence points overwhelmingly to the fact that when one compares Negroes and whites of comparable cultural and educational background, differences in intelligence test scores diminish markedly; the more comparable the background, the less the difference. There is no direct evidence that supports the view that there is an innate difference between members of different racial groups.

A more accurate understanding of the contribution of heredity to intelligence will be possible only when social conditions for all races are equal and when this situation has existed for several generations. Social inequalities deprive large numbers of black people of social, economic, and educational advantages available to a great majority of the white population. The existing social structures prevent black and white people even of the same social class from leading comparable lives. In light of these conditions, it is obvious that no scientific discussion of racial differences can exclude an examination of political, historic, economic, and psychological factors which are inextricably related to racial differences.

Another reaction to the Jesen article is Martin Deutsch's commentary (3). He reviews the literature on compensatory education, intelligence testing, and the

nature of educational environments and concludes that Jensen had constructed an article which had "negative implications for the struggle against racism and for the improvement of the educational system (p.523)." Deutsch (3, p.523) says, "the Jensen article holds a consistent bias toward an undemocratic eugenic and racist hypothesis."

The cultural deprivation theories seem to treat the lower-class culture as if it were totally isolated from all communication with the rest of our society. No one, as I can recall, talks about the reality: there is no subculture in our larger society that is so deprived as to be unable to have some communication with the larger culture through our mass media, through television, through motion pictures, or through just being a part of this society in which people are at least able to see other poeple and listen to them. The sophisticated version of the cultural deprivation explanation of academic retardation for Negro children ostensibly has built up a mythology of cultural isolation that does not seem to be supportable by reality. One would suspect from a careful perusal of the literature which allegedly offers an explanation for Negro children's inability to learn that these children have never had any contact with television, radio, or moving pictures.

Sometimes, we find in the literature explanations of lower-class culture in terms of differences in motivation. The most classical illustration of this theory is that lower-class subcultures demand immediate rather than delayed gratification. This apparently accounts for the fact that lower-class children are unable to learn to read because to learn to read requires delayed gratification.

I must say that after examining various studies offering explanations for poor reading performance among the ethnically different learner, and especially the blacks, they are not as real as they seem.

There are some basic questions which we must address ourselves if we are going to be serious about the issue of more efficient education for minority ethnic groups.

In what way does membership in a minority ethnic group actually interfere with the ability of a child to learn in the elementary grades? What is meant by cognitive deficit as it relates to the ability of a human being to be taught? What is the relationship between the methodology for educating the ethnically different children and the explanations that have been offered as to why they have not learned in the past? To what extent do social deprivation theories perpetuate and explain educational inefficiency among ethnically different children because they are not being taught effectively? To what extent are they not being taught because those who are in charge of teaching them do not believe that they can learn, do not expect that they can learn, and do not relate to them in ways that are conducive to their learning? The reason may very well be that these children are rejected in the classroom (1).

Inasmuch as I am a member of a depressed minority group in our society, I, too look with suspiciousness of the classical studies and theories which purport to explain why my situation is no better than it is. I think that the privileged, or the majority ethnic group has proposed the cultural deprivation theories. They have proposed the IQ gaps, and they have controlled the class and caste factors in our society which cannot and should not be ignored in dealing with this very serious educational problem. Let me repeat: minority ethnic groups, and especially blacks, have been and still are enmeshed in racial class, caste, and self-image psychological problems. Those who write about these problems, by and large, are members of a more privileged group and who cannot possibly be honest and objective in their comparisons.

I think the reality will come for cognitive and affective concerns of minority ethnic children when there is more efficient and effective teaching and less theorizing about why they cannot and do not learn to read. There is sufficient evidence available now that these children will learn if they are taught and they will not learn if they are approached as if they cannot learn. If minority ethnic children

"are taught, accepted, respected, and approached as if they are human beings, the average performance of these children may approach and eventually reach the norm performance of other human beings who are so taught." (1, p.189)

I believe that if human beings are taught, by and large, they learn. And if they are not taught, they do not learn.

ABSTRACT

Realities and Fallacies of Reading Instruction for Ethnically Different Students: Cognitive and Affective Concerns

A review of the literature about reading instruction for the ethnically different student disclosed a body of information largerly disconnected and biased. Information was obtained from a variety of reference sources.

Results show numerous factors which are alleged to be determinants of reading retardation of ethnically different students. Generally, they fall into two categories: racial factors in intelligence and cultural deprivation theories. General conclusions indicate that minority ethnic groups, and especially blacks, have been, and still are enmeshed in racial, class, caste and self-image psychological problems.

Minority ethnic groups are human beings. If they are respected, accepted, and taught as human beings, the average performance of these children may eventually reach the norm performance of other human beings who are so taught.

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